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ABSTRACT

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Pedagogy and Ethnicity: The Practice of Performance as Exemplified in the Teaching of Shange and Butler

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Pedagogy and Ethnicity: The Practice of Performance as Exemplified in the Teaching of Shange and Butler

ABSTRACT

Great theoretical debate has occurred on whether a teacher not of the same biological origin of the author of a text can do justice to the literature of another ethnic or racial group in the class. However, mainstream public university students of largely white populations feel themselves "indoctrinated" in classrooms which have the aim of accomplishing diversity. Reader response theory can be embodied in the practice of performance of selected texts to resolve this problem. The skilled teacher can then deftly move from the students' own presentations to theoretical and historical perspectives, and bypass or subsume resistance in attitudes. Students learn by doing in group work. They report actually beginning to feel like the characters and get a better sense of the author's words.

Great theoretical debate has already occurred on whether a teacher not of the same biological origin of the creator of a text can do adequate presentation of literature from another racial or ethnic identity group in the classroom. I agree that Black women must create their own standards for evaluating African-American womanhood and its creations, and that African-American women must make their own statements about Black female self-definition and self-valuation, as has been argued by Patricia Hill Collins. (1991, 39) Black women judge their own group's behavior by comparing themselves to other Black females facing similar situations and thus determine the presence of a specifically African-American definition of African-American womanhood. But I also assume, as does Lester D. Friedman, that "knowledgeable, well-trained teachers can generate discussions about cultures other than their own," by acknowledging that information is mediated through their own social identities. The next question then to ask is, how do we do more than just change the canon? How do we go further to construct classrooms that reflect awareness of pluralistic perspectives? (1995, 25) As feminist educator Florence Howe asks, how do we truly transform, or change the form of the teaching and not just the list of books on the curriculum? (107)

As a feminist teacher, or as someone who believes that focusing on learning rather than teaching will best serve students, and who believes in using knowledge to empower students to develop strategies that actually facilitate learning (McNaron and Porter), I have found some answers in reader-response approaches to texts of different racial and ethnic origin in classroom practice. By creating embodiment of a text through oral interpretation, I created a way of knowing that establishes "a bridge between cognitive and affective apprehension" (Pryse 27). Like other women's studies teachers in the classroom, I have learned that "'encouraging' students to challenge internalized attitudes usually requires changing the atmosphere, making efforts to increase the level of student discomfort as a

way of moving beyond the limitations of purely cognitive apprehension of difference" (Pryse 27). I found that oral interpretation enhanced the integration between cognitive and affective modes of apprehension and analysis, and that this facilitated textual, literary and sociological appreciation on the part of the students because it accommodated a wide range of student response. Like others who have experimented with being the learner in the classroom (Bass 1994), I "began to learn to make a safe and supportive space within which people could reveal the hidden parts of their selves--the parts we are ashamed of, afraid of, or simply think of are no interest" (Bass 59).

As Kathleen McCormick has described in The Culture of Reading and the Teaching of English, reading strategies are "the techniques readers use to process a text." (86) Drawing items liberally from her list and adding some of my own, these techniques might include well-recognized activities such as creating or recognizing themes; identifying with characters; looking for a consistent point of view; creating distinctions; filling in gaps; recognizing forms; experiencing mood and language; visualizing context; relating the text read to other texts; connecting the text to one's own personal experience or the known personal experience of significant others; reading playfully for multiple meanings; groping for the relationship between form and content; connecting the occurrences in the text to trends in outside culture, and, in particular, striving to understand both the text and its author as a product of their own times.

What McCormick calls "a matching of repertoires" can occur when the text's features fulfill readers' expectations. But what about the context in which the reading of the text occurs? How does what Goffman calls "the frame" negatively effect the context in which initial exposure to reading occurs? (1981) What if the context is one of forced, structured, mandatory consumption in an institution to which an adolescent is sent for status or economic reasons, when the values of the professor might be considerably different than those recognized as a student's own? How does a reader in these

circumstances come to terms with a text? How does a reader in this situation even begin to get close enough to comprehend the text's features?

These questions arise in the theory and practice of the multicultural classroom in mainstream public universities. Recently, I was teaching a general education course on American Experience available as an option to satisfy a required diversity aspect at the University of Massachusetts. Like others there, I was confronted with the problem: how does one make African-American writings "relevant" to largely white, resistant middle class student audiences who identify themselves as having grown up in areas with "no racial problems?" They often resent that they are expected to recognize and come to terms with such problems. As Beverly Daniel Tatum has noted, in a significant article discussing talking about race and learning about race in the classroom which appeared in the Harvard Educational Review, when given a chance, most students respond not with increased appreciation, but with denial. Whenever possible, this extends to physical withdrawal in the form of absenteeism and the reduction of completion of reading and or writing assignments.

There are no universal solutions or specific rules for responding to ethnic, gender, racial and cultural diversity in the classroom. No expert in this newly emerging field can proscribe a solution of the confusing dynamics that can result. Yet increasingly, more and more in the profession are faced with this teaching environment and predicament. (Solomon 1991)

My solution, after two years, was to employ the strategy of performance of two African-American women's texts from the 1970s, Ntzake Shange's For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Was Not Enough, and Octavia Butler's Kindred. In giving the students the freedom to choose, design, plan and implement a performance of sections of each of these texts, I changed the frame of the university lecture-classroom and set up a process where celebratory self-discovery occurred. I broadly utilized reader response theory. I created an environment in which this cross

section of non-majors could define their own interests and concerns, and hence go "beyond the culture wars," to use a phrase from Gerald Graff. Because the students were able to jump in, discuss with each other, and come up with a series of unique presentations, the focus was taken off the perceived indoctrination of a "politically correct" attitude, and onto the fun of men acting out male pickup lines, or of a man playing a pregnant woman with all eyes watching, in Shange. In Butler, considerable giggling and self-consciousness was provoked by women acting as killers and rescuers, which discharged surface feelings of discomfort so that more serious discussions could come about. The repetitive frequency of lectures organized on a contractual basis dulls intense emotional involvement (Frank), but this was cut by requiring students to become proactive in negotiating how the contractual relations of regular class time attendance would be fulfilled.

Students found they could connect their own experiences, or experiences of significant others, for example, when more than one woman was attracted to the same man, and the man, caught in the act of relating to more than one, had to choose. Or, the chosen dramatization and re-dramatization of the scene in Colored Girls where the Viet Nam War veteran comes home to his woman and drops his own kids out of the window brought up an evocative discussion of a male student about his father, also a Viet Nam War veteran, who had gone away to and come back from, but had never discussed the war.

By assigning the texts, but allowing the students to select, determine and present their own dramatizations, the teacher turns into an active listener to the students' own experience. This embodies the work, as the lecturer about the experiences of remote and removed "others" begins to fade. The students must delve into and read the text to determine mood, to select background music, props and appropriate costumes for characters. They might even express in their small group's rehearsal time their alienation with the content of the assignment. Yet their competitive spirit as each team or group is perceived as participating in a competition with the others overrules. The teacher has to give up the aura of projected transference and becomes more like a hands-on coach. This

teaching requires dissecting each performance or production, in a relaxed yet purposeful way arguing backwards from the presentations the students create to argue for cultural comprehension in broader terms.

This style of teaching also allows for the broadest range of development and reading comprehension. While most students are struggling with the level of reading for comprehension or plot, in these two texts taught with this high level of reader-response approach, those elements are dispensed with easily. In teaching Shange, the first issue often raised by students is difficulty with the language, although critics might note the hybrid form of choreographed poetry and Greek choral drama. (Waxman) Rather than gestures, moves and meanings. Black English and terms students associate with swearing seem to leap out to first-time readers. Both these elements at first lead the students to put aside the text. By having to read or perform in class, students are pushed over that hurdle which many met when reading at home alone, a context very much removed from the performance-context in which it was created. Kindred, on the other hand, may seem a confusing science fiction past and forward flash text. However, having one student per group summarize the action in the assigned fifty pages of the day, prior to the performance: and another student, after the performance, point out themes of that section, can assist the process immensely. Students can participate at their own level of ability and rely on the class time when others do presenting to coast them through the more difficult ups and downs and ins and outs of the different texts, if need be.

Furthermore, while there is much discussion and dialogue about recognition of different learning styles, grades in most English and literature classes are assigned by a students' ability to write well, either on exams or in papers. But what if a student can conceptualize and direct a production, yet can't write? This happened in my class, with a inner-city transfer student overwhelmed at a four year college institution. Or what if a student writes English at a B level, but can research and give a good researched oral report, as happened with a student whose first language was Tibetan? As one student wrote,

pleased that 50% of the grade was to be based on hands-on performance and participation, "not everyone does well on exams." This teaching style uniquely allows for different modes of learners, beyond levels of uneven development in preparation.

Of course, words of caution are in order. If most students come to class taught this way from large lecture halls where they are forced fed and then asked to regurgitate assigned information, continuous feedback must be made to the teacher. I asked for a mid-term evaluation form, in which I allowed for comments as well as offered yes-and-no check-the-box questions. I then read the comments back to the class, and explained the experiential theory of education with which I was working. Inevitably, some did complain that the students were expected to teach themselves, and that their learning seemed to occur in a random process. Critiques were also expressed in the end-of-the-term experiential papers, in which I asked the students to reflect upon their experience of the text in reading for performance. As one student wrote, expressing well the attitudes of several: "When I got to our first American Experience class I realized that a majority of the grade would be on class participation and performance in front of the class. I was suddenly nervous and wanted to drop the class immediately." The student recounts how she was in her dorm room "ready to call the registrar and drop the course. But, I decided that I wasn't going to be able to run from my fear forever. I decided to stick with the course and try my hardest to overcome my fear." These kinds of comments which appeared in the evaluations, running the range from expressing what students expected I wanted to hear to expression of extreme discomfort with my unconventional mode, needed to be addressed not only for the sake of the students, but for the sake of articulating to the supervisory bureacracy that if the administration is genuinely committed to broadening and modernizing their students education to include feminist, postcolonial and racial critiques of the contemporary modern world, then support is needed for unconventional efforts which might lead to negative evaluations, since that challenge might include upsetting a privileged view of the world (Ling 189)

Without lecturing on Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed, I gently articulated my philosophy of learn-by-doing throughout. This was particularly needed in response to mid-term evaluations, in response to comments from a supervisor who visited the class, and in response to final papers in conference. Even the student quoted above went on: ". . . working with the group helped me a lot because I wasn't all alone with all of the pressure just on myself. . . . I knew the material better after performing and listening to the other groups. It gave me a chance to express the authors' words."

Freire advocated codification by the oppressed, in his practice of teaching literacy, (i. e. , if you want to teach some one to read, listen and observe first, find out what words you can build on, and then teach the vocabulary he or she expresses the desire to know). I advocate codification by those oppressed at another level, as I work towards the now-common goal at many institutions of higher learning, that of cultural pluralism and the higher degree of more sophisticated cultural literacy which we now require students to undertake.

As the student quoted above concludes, performing "allows a person to actually feel like the characters and get a better sense of what they were like." In this way, students can even be led to discover that they enjoy reading, even though, at the start of the class, as one reported, she "hated book stores," because she "didn't like to read much." As this student came to realize, the "several girls, each of different descent," "were speaking of every woman's triumph over bad times." This goal should, indeed, be the goal of all pedagogy concerning ethnicity. When the student performed her part of the poem, she maintains, she was "able to feel" her character. She cites a passage from the speech by the Lady in Brown, and writes, ". . . I feel that this poem is what stayed with me throughout the semester. When I think about my English class and ask myself what I have gained, I answer, I've gained knowledge. Now I know what it is I like to read." Another student concluded: "As I continue through college, I hope to encounter more courses like this. Courses that are not so focused on memorizing and understanding the text in only one

voice, but a course that let's you interpret the material for yourself and allows you to decide what is important in your mind." In another concluding paper, a student reports positively that "it was I who decided what the author meant and how the characters felt, rather than the teacher telling me. Also, everyone in the class shared their opinions so that one could learn from the other."

Not only did students report growth in individual self-confidence; they also reported the non-hegemonic structure of the classroom. This they deemed as appropriate in form to express the content of the course, which was, basically, the non-hegemonic culture of America. As the syllabus made room for more than one view, and more than one voice, so did the style of teaching in the class. The students named and appreciated that the pluralism of the agenda was reinforced by the pluralism of the classroom, as each saw the repeat performances of the same text and author. Thus the culture of the reading in the classroom was experienced as appropriately as diverse as the culture of the authors who wrote the texts. This, one student wrote, "helped me to consider other aspects of the text that I never would have acknowledged." As another summed up her experience, "All of the performances showed how differently everyone in the class perceived the poem. No two groups did an identical performance. We were able to see all of the different interpretations. This helped me to look at the poem from different perspectives."

Thus, in terms of imparting an array of reading strategies to students, the practice of performance as exemplified in the teaching of Shange and Butler, for the most part, seems to be a success. I had the reward of reading, at the end of a semester, a paper concluding that one of my favorite books, one which after all I placed on the syllabus, has become one of the favorite books of a student; that, by this time, she had already read it through three times, and that each time she notices "a new line or have a new feeling that I some how missed in previous readings." Imparting this joy is, indeed, the major reason I entered the profession.

Working this way one finds that, like Bohannan, who learned about Shakespeare's Hamlet from the Tiv elders with whom she was working in the West African Bush, students will instruct you in the true meaning of the books one teaches. You might likewise discover that you are among those who know things and who can teach you great wisdom. Perhaps it isn't the natives' point of view we need to work on grasping, as has been critiqued by Trinh T. Min-ha as an objective claimed by those who "seek to reveal one society to another." Perhaps, now, we need to work on grasping not the point of view of the writer, but the point of view of the reader, in this particular sort of cultural reading context. By continuing to isolate race as the sole or primary determinant factor, which is not to deny that indeed in the history of this country race has played a pre-eminent role (Radhakrishan), we might be further locking race out of the contemporary American context as represented to us in the attitudes of our resisting, state-of-denial undergraduates. Others engaging experimentally in feminist pedagogical theories and practices have gone even further, for example, by requesting that student groups write a headline for a poem or, alternatively, plan how to turn the poem into a music video; write a poem from a poem; create a sculpture of responses to the poem; draw the poem, and share responses to the drawings. (DiBernard) All of these proactive methods of studying and developing reading practices have in common student-centered activity, proactive learning laboratory learning, and expansion beyond "correct " and "incorrect " responses to an object of study. Thus, not a single factor can be separated from the myriad of others that might be responses in our students, and more contextualized learning occurs in the multicultural classroom.

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